

The Chronicle Wine Selections: Washington state Syrah and Rhone-style blends

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Washington state - similar to California's South Central Coast - is known for Syrah. The Columbia Valley in particular is a hotbed, with many top producers sourcing their grapes from this American Viticultural Area and several Columbia Valley subappellations including the Wahluke Slope.

Washington Syrah generally tends to be more understated than California Syrah, which is beloved by many for its big, juicy dark fruit. Other Rhone grape varieties - including Grenache, Mourvedre, Counoise and Viognier - do well and are often found in Rhone-style blends.

Our recommended Washington state wines show less overt alcoholic heat, have good tannic structure, ripe fruit, spice and minerality.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2005 Andrew Rich Columbia Valley Syrah (\$24) Rich moved to Oregon in 1994 after working at Bonny Doon Vineyard for six years. His "workhorse" Syrah has intense floral aromas, with brown baking spice, coriander, white pepper, tart plum and blueberry. Similar flavors support the wine's fine tannic structure and acidity.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2004 Desert Wind Wahluke Slope Syrah (\$35) The Wahluke Slope is one of the hottest zones in the Columbia Valley. This wine has warm brown baking spices, peppered beef jerky, white pepper, juicy plum and brambly berry aromas. A rather briny flavor profile includes blackberry jam, and sweet oak spice cushions the palate when it reaches the chewy tannins that give this wine its very firm structure.

Rating: TWO STARS 2006 Dusted Valley Stained Tooth Columbia Valley Syrah (\$24) Syrah is co-fermented with Viognier, a little Mourvedre and Grenache to make wine with a big, sweet, California-style nose. Easy, approachable and fruit-forward, this wine has boysenberry, blueberry, pepper and a touch of barnyard. Fruity sweetness follows on the palate but there is some acidity to balance.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2003 Forgeron Cellars Columbia Valley Syrah (\$30) Forgeron is French for blacksmith, referring to artisan hand crafters. This 100 percent Syrah shows a lovely perfume of violets, very ripe purple fruit, toasted nuts and nutmeg that extend to both nose and palate. Good structure, pleasantly grippy tannins and spice linger on the finish.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2003 Goose Ridge Vineyards Columbia Valley Syrah (\$20) A noted leader in Washington state's wine industry, the late Walter Clore had helped the Monson family select their estate vineyard site, one of the state's largest, near Red Mountain. Dark woody notes, peppery bacon, extracted blackberry, gray mineral and slight tar/dark caramel

are present on both nose and palate. It's a rewarding wine, though it shows a touch of alcoholic heat.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2005 L'Ecole No. 41 Columbia Valley Syrah (\$25)
There's spicy oak here, with notes of boysenberry pie a la mode, plus subtle mineral shadings. Flavors of brambly berry, currant and bright black cherry lift the palate and end with a long, mineral-tinged finish. The fruit balances an impressive structure, which hints at a good, long life.

Rating: THREE STARS 2004 McCrea Boushey Vineyard Yakima Valley Syrah (\$48)
This 100 percent Syrah comes from Dick Boushey's well-regarded Boushey Grande Cote Vineyard. There's some complexity in the aromas of bacon-wrapped porcini mushrooms, boysenberry pie, earth and baking spice. The broad, robust palate has lovely fruit that leaves a lingering sweetness and spicy richness, that helps hide its 14.8 percent alcohol.

Rating: THREE AND A HALF STARS 2004 McCrea Cuvee Orleans Yakima Valley Syrah (\$55)
This special cuvee is owner-winemaker Doug McCrea's tribute to his birthplace - New Orleans. Included is Mourvedre (12 percent) and Viognier (3 percent) from well-known Boushey and Ciel du Cheval vineyards. This wine has aromas of dark berry and Japanese umeboshi plum that meld with earth, game and bacon dusted with black pepper. A palate of sweet juicy fruit and silky tannins blends with ripe acidity in this intense, well-balanced wine.

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS 2004 McCrea Sirocco Washington State (\$35)
This Rhone blend of Grenache (40 percent), Syrah (25 percent), Mourvedre (30 percent) and Counoise (5 percent) is named for the hot winds that blow from Africa across the Mediterranean. Bright strawberry, raspberry, white pepper and mineral aromas combine with slightly darker but still buoyant, ripe fruit on the palate. The wine ends with a tart, mineral finish.

Rating: THREE STARS 2005 Otis Kenyon Walla Walla Valley Syrah (\$30)
This is the first Syrah release for owners Stephen Kenyon and Deborah Dunbar and winemaker Dave Stephenson sets a high bar. Waves of violet, anise and ripe black cherry with currant and plum highlights entrance the nose. The silky, sweet, supple palate displays a touch of minerality, finishing with balance and finesse. Available at the winery only.

Also Recommended

2004 Dunham Cellars Columbia Valley Syrah (\$45)

2004 Gamache Vintners Columbia Valley Syrah (\$28)

2005 Gordon Brothers Cellars Columbia Valley Syrah (\$20)

2004 McCrea Ciel du Cheval Red Mountain Syrah (\$48)

2005 McCrea Washington State Syrah (\$28)

2004 Nota Bene Cellars Washington State Syrah (\$28)

2005 Tertulia Cellars Les Collines Walla Walla Valley Syrah (\$29)

2005 Woodward Canyon Columbia Valley Syrah (\$39)

2003 Zefina Winery Serience Horse Heaven Hills Red (\$30)

Key: Rating: FOUR STARS Extraordinary Rating: THREE STARS Excellent Rating: TWO STARS
Good

This week's panelists: Lynne Char Bennett, Chronicle staff writer; Jon Bonné, Chronicle Wine editor.

- *Lynne Char Bennett*

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